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The Burning Airman and the Passion for a World Free of Jews

This is a death cult, paralleling that of Hamas itself.

By Kathleen Hayes

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On X, a weeping young woman — she's Jewish, according to the post; a small Magen David tattoo is visible on her right hand — howls over the world's inability to understand why Aaron Bushnell, a 25-year-old U.S. airman, killed himself by setting himself on fire in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C. the previous Sunday afternoon. "Are you f—ing serious?" the woman sobs. "His last words were 'Free Palestine.' This man was an active service member for our f—ing military — a white man who knew his privilege and he knew the effect that if he killed himself, that he would actually get coverage on the news … And how many more people have to say that they don't support the existence of Israel for this to end!"

Bushnell's martyrdom fills her with a grief-stricken ecstasy. She is in the grip of a secular religion in which Jews are again the earthly antichrist and followers are frenzied by the need for purification. No sacrifice is too great, no pain too terrible, in the face of so much evil.

I'd like to believe the woman is just performing for likes, as some commenters claim, but I don't. She is, clearly, desperately sincere. She truly believes the world's sins would be purged if it were only rid of the Jewish state. That the drive to annihilate Israel necessarily threatens the existence of all Jews, including herself, obviously does not occur to her. Bushnell's martyrdom fills her with a grief-stricken ecstasy. She is in the grip of a secular religion in which Jews are again the earthly antichrist and followers are frenzied by the need for purification. No sacrifice is too great, no pain too terrible, in the face of so much evil.

The usual Israel-hating suspects tweeted their awe over Bushnell's suicide. Presidential candidate Cornel West: "Let us never forget the extraordinary courage and commitment of brother Aaron Bushnell who died for truth and justice!" Guardian columnist Owen Jones: "Aaron Bushnell died because he had too much humanity for a world run by people who don't have any." Roger Waters posted the gruesome suicide video with the eulogy: "Aaron Bushnell All-American hero."

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Hamas' death-worship is both suicidal and homicidal, so this Western version threatens not only its followers but, most immediately, Jews. And the more I think about it, the more it seems that truly combatting antisemitism requires delving into the very essence of what it is to be human.

There are things worth dying for. An altogether different question is whether it's worthwhile, never mind glorious, to die horrifically as a protest, knowing it will almost certainly have no effect on the thing you are protesting. I've tried to imagine the alternate scenario—Jews setting themselves on fire to show their support of Israel—but I can't. This isn't because we're not that committed to our people, but because we know how much more value there is in fighting by remaining alive. Jews have never had to seek martyrdom; throughout history, it's found the Jews all too often.

Death is only appealing to those who feel their lives have no purpose and whose hearts are empty. The most fortune-kissed generations in history possess, instead of gratitude, guilt over their privilege. They feel they have nothing to live for but the need for atonement, rendering them all too susceptible to martyrdom — and murder.

That so many young people, and older commentators beyond the usual Israel-bashers, find his self-immolation inspiring reveals a measureless chasm in our society.

My views about Israel's war on Hamas are worlds apart from Bushnell's. Still I felt a jolt of recognition after learning he grew up in an insular Christian organization described as something of a cult. He'd left it for the military, substituting one high-control group for another, then became a familiar figure in socialist and anarchist groups. I imagine he was looking for something to consume him, a sense of belonging and intense purpose, and he thought he'd found it in the battle over the Holy Land. That so many young people, and older commentators beyond the usual Israel-bashers, find his self-immolation inspiring reveals a measureless chasm in our society.

I railed against Israel for many years, and I realize that by speaking of the yearnings of an Israel-hater, some may wonder whether my belated embrace of Zionism is really total. These horrific post-Oct. 7 times cry out for taking a clear side, and I am firmly committed to the side of Israel. I'm not so naïve as to think the people rampaging like pogromists on campuses and in city streets can simply be won over through empathy and compassion.

At the same time I increasingly see that the crisis facing us isn't just political or social, but spiritual. In "The Strange Death of Europe,"

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here? What is my life for? Does it have any purpose beyond itself? — have always driven human beings, but in the West today there's a sense that the story — the answers we've turned to in the modern age — has run out. Science and historical criticism have probably dealt an irreversible blow to the literal-truth claims of religion, but there's begun to be a drift toward affirming that "Western liberal societies may in fact owe something to the religion from which they arose."

I've experienced something similar in my own attempt at redemption: Asking why I believed antisemitic things inexorably led me to begin exploring Judaism. For most of my life I believed, as do my family and my now-ex-comrades, that a belief in God isn't necessary to lead a full, moral and purposeful life. Now I'm not so sure. I can't make myself believe, but I've begun to see the wisdom of respecting the traditions and beliefs that sustained my mother's family through their darkest days and greatest joys. It takes a lot of hubris to repudiate the deepest answers in which mankind believed for millennia, asserting that each of us must, and can, find our substitute in environmentalism, an online group or (in the case of some of us) a Trotskyist organization.

That this is not working, that the story seems to have run out, is manifested by the significant numbers of people who find transcendence in the grisly livestreamed fiery death of a troubled young man. That they see Jews as the essence of what they are fighting against, the embodiment of evil, is a feature of their religion, not a bug. And unless society finds a new story to sustain itself, the fire will continue to rage.

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